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Abstract

After the publication of *The Fire-Dwellers* in 1969 Margaret Laurence stated:

At the moment, I have the same feeling as I did when I knew I had finished writing about Africa. I've gone as far as I personally can go, in the area in which I've lived for the past three novels. A change of direction would appear to be indicated. I have a halfway hunch where I want to go, but I don't know how to get there, or what will be there if I do. Maybe I'll strike it lucky and find the right compass, or maybe I won't.¹

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After the publication of *The Fire-Dwellers* in 1969 Margaret Laurence stated:

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Margaret Laurence later reiterated her concern with new directions. In an unpublished lecture she acknowledged the influence watching television has had on her and said:

What I want to get is the effect of voices and pictures – just voices and pictures. I became obsessed with this notion, as it seemed to convey the quality of the lives I wanted to get across. It was only much later that I realized that 'voices and pictures' is only another – and to my mind, better way of saying 'audio-visual'.²

Already incipient in *A Jest of God*, the change in direction really occurs in *The Fire-Dwellers*. Her African short stories and novels are characterized by a conventional narrative technique. *The Stone Angel* also develops along traditional lines except that, compared with the previous novels, the use of strictly chronological flashbacks throughout the book represents a slight innovation. The first crack appears in *A Jest of God*, grows wider in *The Fire-Dwellers* and then in *The Diviners* the traditional mold of the novel finally bursts. Gradually we see Margaret Laurence working to-

wards a novel form in which the 'showing' will prevail over the 'telling', a novel less meant to be 'read' than 'seen' or 'heard' by its receiver, who, accordingly, will be less of a 'lecteur', a reader-interpreter than a 'liseur', a reader acting both as a listener and spectator.

How does Margaret Laurence manage to convey both 'voices and pictures' through the sheer medium of the printed word, to 'show' the story most vividly?

She makes her fictional language as visual and sonorous as possible. In her last three novels the visual element is to be found at two different levels. At a first level – the typographical level – it represents all that contributes to the visual variety of the printed page. The dashes in *A Jest of God* are meant to mark the change of voice, the shift from the first to the third person, the conversion of the heroine-narrator into a narrator-observer. In *The Fire-Dwellers* they introduce the innermost thoughts of the central character, Stacey. These visual reference marks, however, are missing from *The Diviners*. The italics indicate the interior monologues of Morag, the heroine of *The Diviners* and Stacey's flights into an imaginary world. Stacey's flashbacks are indented on the page. News from radio and TV stand out in capital letters in *The Fire-Dwellers*, the text of *The Diviners* is interspersed with songs, catalogues printed in various types. Like some poets Margaret Laurence is fond of typographical effects. The presentation of *The Diviners* breaks with the traditional continuity of form; the chapters are divided into sequences ('snapshot', 'memorybank movie') with the latter being sometimes cut up into shorter sequences entitled 'inner film'; this deliberate formal anarchy reminds one of U.S.A. by Dos Passos. Margaret Laurence even thought how marvellous it would be to write a novel, newspaper style, by setting up the book in four columns so as to show everything going on simultaneously as in life; a quadruple presentation which would unfortunately require four sets of eyes.³

The visual quality of the novel, at a second level – that of the narrative – is created by the use of the present tense and the third

person as well as by cinematic processes.

The present tense is commonly employed by the mass media, radio and television in particular, as the most adequate tense for reporting, because by reducing the distance between the report and its receiver the latter is given an impression of immediacy. *A Jest of God* and *The Fire-Dwellers* are written exclusively in the present tense; whereas in *The Diviners* there is a constant shifting from the present to the past and vice versa, with the switching from one to the other producing, so to speak, a stereoscopic vision of things. The inner organization of *The Diviners* is complex due to the interlocking of the different narratives; there are, effectively, three narrative levels. At a first level – that of the narration in the past (the tense favoured by traditional fiction) – we find the heroine, busy working on her fifth novel, having trouble to cope with her situation as a writer, a wife (she is divorced), a mother (Pique, the eighteen year old daughter she had from the Métis Jules Tonnerre, is a constant worry for her). At the second level and parallel to the first narrative, in the sequences entitled ‘Memorybank Movie’, is unfolded the story of Morag Gunn since her parents’ death when she was still a child, up to the time of the narration of the novel. Within these films a ‘third degree’ narrative is inserted, including both the story of the Gunn Clan told to young Morag by the man who has adopted her, and the legend of the Tonnerres, reported by one member of the Métis family. This ‘méta-méta’ narrative is written in the past tense, the preterite significantly expressing here ‘une sortie de passé sans âge’, as critic Gérard Genette would put it.

The film, in the present tense, of Morag’s previous life is introduced into the past of the first narrative as a sort of immediate report. Somehow the writer, in her quest for time lost, thus visualizes the moving, ‘present’ film of her life, which stands out against a background of legends fixed in the past.

The third person also gives the illusion of presence and immediacy; *The Fire-Dwellers* is written in the third person (and in the present tense); it is quite appropriately used in the sequences of

the 'film' in *The Diviners*. As regards the voice the same phenomenon as in the case of time occurs; namely an occasional shifting from the 'I' to the 'she', as, for instance, in *A Jest of God*. No question here, on the part of the writer, as with some contemporary novelists, of a deliberate intention of confusing the reader by intermingling narrator and character; nor does the relation between the narrator and his character ever tend to fluctuate. What we have here is a deliberate shifting as the author pretends to take the camera and replaces the somewhat distant, introspective 'I' by the third person. We find ourselves confined to the closed, nearly autistic world of Rachel Cameron. Through her eyes alone are we permitted to see everything: first herself, an unmarried primary-school teacher, threatened by the crisis of middle-age and haunted by a crippling feeling of frustration, the small town of Manawaka, her difficult cohabitation with a possessive mother, then her brief but sterile encounter with Nick, the son of Ukrainian immigrants during one summer of the 60s. Eight times we escape from the introspective cage in which Rachel has kept us imprisoned from the start; eight escapes duly indicated by dashes. These appear suddenly in the second half of the novel. How can we explain this unexpected diversion in the long monologue of the heroine? One may suppose that the task she has set herself – that of minutely reconstituting the facts – quite naturally leads Rachel to establish a distance, to put herself in the position of an observer so as to see and make us see better. She is induced to imagine little living pictures in which she may somehow watch herself playing a part, the very part she has undertaken to 'show' us. Thus Rachel and the actors of her drama appear briefly, in close-ups. Two passages that are precisely significant because they are presented as real pictures will illustrate the point. Searching her memory for the person who one day had addressed her with 'honey' and not with 'darling', as Nick was wont to do, she finds again the man, one travelling salesman:

Maybe it was the salesman who travelled in embalming fluid. Do that part over again.

– He makes a slightly flippant thing of it, but the reality is obvious to her, the tension of him, the sureness that hides some unsureness.⁴

Later on she evokes the scene in the kitchen of Nick's parents when the intrusion of Jago, his brother, makes her so uncomfortable that she leaves:

I could have handled the situation differently. It would have been easy. I see that now.

– They are sitting in the kitchen, the two of them, drinking coffee with rum. They don't need to talk. They are quite happy, just like this. The boots outside the back door make a scuffling noise – someone wiping his feet before coming in the house... (p. 160)

As on a screen, close-ups and multiplicity of plans enable the novelist to render certain details of plot and character particularly vivid. That the image proper is of paramount importance to her is evidenced in her quite uncommon use of the photo at the beginning of *The Diviners*. The photo here serves, so to speak, as a trigger to the memory of Morag as she is busy visualizing her past. So the first chapter contains a series of six sequences entitled 'snapshot'; in these are shown, one by one, in strictly chronological order, the six photographs of her early childhood she has retrieved from a drawer. Photo number 3:

The child, three years old, is standing behind the heavy-wire-netted farm gate, peering out. The person with the camera is standing unseen on the other side. The child is laughing, acting up, play-acting goofily, playing to an audience of one, the picture-taker.⁵

The allusion to the taking of the picture itself is meant to make the illusion all the more complete. After the minute description of the photo follow (also in the present tense) the details missing from it – the decor and family – which the eye of the observer brings out.

But the cinema is not only static; it involves movement as well as image. Margaret Laurence does her best to lend her narrative a kinetic, dynamic quality. It is in *The Fire-Dwellers*, in whose opening line the author denounces the 'crazy rhyme' of modern life,

that her writing reveals itself at its most dynamic. The book covers three months of the hectic life of Stacey MacAindra: thirty-nine, obsessed by middle-age and overweight, a house going to ruin, four children who are gradually wearing her out, a husband who is a travelling salesman and has no time to talk, a widowed father-in-law claiming constant attention. In the background the big city of Vancouver, the atomic threat, the mass media that day after day assails the heroine. The camera is a multiscreen, fast-shuttering camera, working to the 'crazy rhyme' of Stacey: a good wife, mother and house-keeper but a sexually frustrated woman, she is determined at once to assume her responsibilities at home and to meet the demands of her body elsewhere. Thus the camera takes us from the family breakfast table, across the back country, in a truck driven (at a breakneck speed, of course) by a friend of the husband, or, for a few hours, to some distant beach with a young artist; it brings us quickly back to the MacAindra home more often than not too late for the children waiting to be picked up at school. Then it's dinner, the children's homeworks, the neighbours, TV shows or parties, and on and on goes the frantic round of days. A series of concrete moments, each of which is filtered through the central character's consciousness, flashpast our eyes.

In *The Diviners* the movement follows an axis which is no longer horizontal (in *The Fire-Dwellers* we remain essentially in the present) but vertical (with a continuous shuttling back and forth between past and present). As a matter of fact the book is the product of a complex cinematic 'montage', a combination of films and small 'dramatiques' (TV plays) in the present tense alongside the first narrative in the past. Into one of the memorybank movies are fitted two inner films in which the image of a fictitious Morag fancying her future literary success and her death is superimposed on the image of young Morag (pp. 124-5). Elsewhere we find small 'dramatiques' which re-enact successive periods of Canadian history and Morag's life, featuring, for instance, the famous female pioneer Catharine Parr Traill circa 1840, Morag's schoolteachers,

her neighbours at the time of her divorce etc.

In order to create movement, to dramatize the narration, the images have to be as sharp and instantaneous as possible. Therefore the narrative in both *The Fire-Dwellers* and *The Diviners* is stripped of the lengthy analyses of the traditional novel; psychological issues are handled in rapid touches or translated into scenes.

Besides image and movement there is also a regular soundtrack. Sound effects are first achieved through gross devices: scores of the métis people's songs in the appendix of *The Diviners*, news from the radio and TV throughout *The Fire-Dwellers*, which also abounds in onomatopoeias; the ringing of the alarm-clock is rendered by BRRING in capitals (p. 25), the noise of the traffic is expressed by 'Ching, Ching, Ching' (p. 17).

The sound element is also to be found at a second level – that of the narration. Stacey is assailed by the radio, TV, and the circumambient noises, all the stéréophony of modern life. Morag is lulled by the music of the Canadian national anthem, of the Métis songs, of imaginary conversations. Rachel pays close attention to her own voice as well as to the others'. *The Fire-Dwellers* is a cacophonous book, *The Diviners* a singing one; despite its introspective character *A Jest of God* is not a 'mute' but a talking book.

It is as if through Margaret Laurence's pages we hear the very grain of the human voice. The latter occupies a major place, indeed, in the novelist's world. Most significantly, the TV film that was adapted from the novel *A Jest of God* bears as a title ('Rachel, Rachel') the first name of the heroine who keeps repeating it to herself or aloud, obsessed as she is by the very phenomenon of the voice and, particularly, by the sacred gift of tongues some people are endowed with.

How can the tone of voice be conveyed? By the present tense, because it is closer to life than the past, critic Roland Barthes answers. In Margaret Laurence's works it is also rendered by the dialogues which take up a predominant place in the narration and are made as true to life as possible.

The small 'dramatiques' mentioned above were centred around

dialogues. The dialogues in *The Diviners* retain the traditional form whereas those in *The Fire-Dwellers* are characterized by a lack of quotation marks (and introductory dashes) and of the usual 'he said' or 'she said'; they blend into the text. The reader, who may be disoriented by the absence of any introductory marks, is asked to identify the voice of the speaker by himself. On the other hand, some sentences in those dialogues remain unfinished so as to create the illusion of reality, of the speech voluntarily breaking off, of the voice fading into the surrounding hubbub. Here is part of a dialogue in *The Fire-Dwellers* between husband and wife who have trouble in communicating with each other:

Look, what do you *want* me to say?
I don't *want* you to say anything
Then why do you keep on
I'm sorry it's just that (p. 70)

or the conversation carried on amidst the bustle attending the end of a party:

It's been such a pleasure meeting you ladies, and thanks a million, Mrs Fogler, and now I really must
Thank *you* for coming. We certainly all had a wonderful (p. 78)

Greater use is made of direct speech than of reported speech which appears in the inner monologues. The heroine addresses herself or tries to reconstitute former dialogues. In *The Fire-Dwellers* Stacey recollects a scene with Tess, her neighbour, who has just had a showy sign made for their house:

– *Three Five Seven* in scrolled numbers and a blue jay perched on a crescent moon. *Get it, Stacey? Bluejay crescent. Cute, eh?* And I said, *Gee that's really cute, Tess.* (p. 28)

At another point in the book (p. 52) she attempts to recreate an interview she had heard on the radio.

Margaret Laurence's ideal writing would be an 'écriture orale',

'à haute voix', as Barthes puts it in *Le Plaisir du texte*, one which 'fasse entendre dans leur matérialité, dans leur sensualité, le souffle, la rocaille, la pulpe des lèvres, toute une présence du museau humain...' in order to 'déporter le signifié très loin et [...] jeter, pour ainsi dire, le corps anonyme de l'acteur dans [l']oreille'.⁶

In many respects the audio-visual enterprise of Margaret Laurence reminds one of Dos Passos. By using in their fiction processes related to cinematic techniques both try to convey the complexity of the present, to capture the movement of life and its sounds; both are anxious to express the simultaneity of the events; but whereas Dos Passos proceeds through parallel narrations and the juxtaposition of characters, the facts in Margaret Laurence's novels are refracted by only one consciousness. In both cases the exchange between producer and receiver takes place less at the level of the intellect and sensibility than at the level of perception.

Margaret Laurence's technique is not flawless. In my opinion *The Fire-Dwellers* is a better book than *The Diviners*. Obviously she is taking a new direction, one which suits her temperament, more 'sensorial' than cerebral. She dreams of writing a novel jointly with an illustrator.⁷

How far will she dare to go? What will her next novel be like? The one she is working on right now and which gives her no end of troubles? Will it be a comic-strip novel or one equipped with tape-recordings?

NOTES

1. Margaret Laurence, 'Ten Years' Sentences' in *Canadian Literature*, XLI, 1969, p. 16.
2. 'Gadgetry or Growing? ... Form and Voice in the Novel', an unpublished lecture reported by Clara Thomas, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1975, p. 126.
3. 'Gadgetry or Growing?', p. 125.
4. Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God*, McClelland and Stewart-Bantam, Toronto, 1977, p. 142.

5. Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners*, Bantam Books, Toronto, 1975, p. 8.
6. R. Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte*, Seuil, Paris, 1973, p. 105.
7. 'Gadgetry or Growing?', p. 126.